



Eczema and Dry Skin

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Eczema

Eczema (known as “atopic dermatitis”) is a chronic skin disorder. It often affects people with asthma, hay fever, and other allergies. It causes a very itchy, red, scaly rash that may weep or ooze a clear fluid. The rash may first develop as tiny blisters that break and crust over. It can become infected, especially if scratching is a problem.

In children, eczema appears most often on the face, scalp, buttocks, thighs, and torso. Eczema is often worse during infancy and greatly improves by early adulthood. Many children improve by age 5 or 6.

In adults, eczema usually affects the neck, the inside of the elbows, and the backs of the knees. Adults whose hands or feet are often exposed to irritating substances, such as chemicals, can develop eczema on those areas.

Home treatment

There are many steps you can take to help improve eczema. The most important is preventing dry skin. (Please see reverse side for more information.) Avoiding harsh chemicals and allergens can also be important. Here’s how to help your skin retain moisture and recover from eczema:

- Take brief daily baths or showers with lukewarm (not hot) water. Use a gentle soap (*Dove*, *Basis*, *Aveeno*, *Neutrogena*) or a non-soap cleanser (*Cetaphil* or *Aveeno*). Even better, bathe without soap.
- After bathing, pat skin dry with a towel. Do not rub.
- Apply a lubricating cream (*Vaseline*, *Nutraderm*, *DML*, *Moisturel*). The cream may help keep your skin from drying out. Reapply cream often.
- Using an oral antihistamine (*Benadryl*) may help relieve itching and relax you enough to allow

sleep. Avoid antihistamine and anti-septic creams and sprays, which irritate the skin.

- Use a humidifier in the bedroom.
- Avoid contact with any irritants or allergens (chemicals, strong perfumes, or certain fabrics such as wool and acrylics).
- Wash clothes and bedding in a mild detergent and rinse at least twice. Do not use a fabric softener if it is irritating.
- For more tips on relieving itching, see “Itching” in the index of your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.

Call Kaiser Permanente if . . .

- Crusting or weeping sores appear. You may have a bacterial infection.
- A red, patchy rash appears on your face and you have joint pain and fever.
- Itching interferes with sleep and home treatment is not working.

Relief from itching for dry skin and eczema

- Keep the itchy area cool and wet. Try a compress soaked in ice water.
- An oatmeal bath may help relieve itching. Wrap one cup of oatmeal in a cotton cloth and boil as you would to cook it. Use this as a sponge and bathe in tepid water without soap. Or try an *Aveeno* colloidal oatmeal bath.
- Calamine lotion is helpful for poison ivy or oak rashes.
- Try an over-the-counter one percent hydrocortisone cream for small itchy areas. Use very sparingly on your face or genitals. If itching is severe, your physician may prescribe a stronger cream.
- Try an over-the-counter oral antihistamine (such as *Chlor-Trimeton* or *Benadryl*).
- Cut nails short or wear gloves at night to prevent scratching.
- Wear cotton clothing. Avoid wool and acrylic fabrics next to your skin.



Eczema and Dry Skin

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Dry skin

Dry, itchy, flaky skin is a common problem. When the skin loses water (not oil) to the air, you can develop excessive dryness. Dry indoor air is a common cause, as is excessive bathing with strong soaps and hot water. Dry skin often gets worse in the winter due to lower humidity and indoor heat.

Steps to prevent dry skin

- Humidify your home, especially the bedroom.
- Avoid hot showers. They strip the skin's natural oil, which helps hold in moisture. Baths are much kinder to the skin than showers.
- Don't use strong detergents and deodorant soaps. Avoid *Ivory*, which is very drying. Use mild soaps such as *Dove* or non-soap cleansers like *Cetaphil*.
- Limit use of perfumes and perfumed products.
- Avoid overexposure to the sun.
- Use a moisturizing lotion after your bath.

Home treatment for dry skin

- Follow the prevention guidelines above.
- Bathe every other day instead of every day. Use warm or cool water and a gentle soap (*Dove*, *Tone*, or *Basis*). Use little or no soap on dry skin areas.

- Pat dry with a towel. Don't rub your skin.
- Apply a moisturizer (*Vaseline*, *Moisturel*, *Nutraderm*) while the skin is still damp to seal in moisture. A light layer of petroleum jelly is also an effective and inexpensive moisturizer. Reapply lotion often.
- For very dry hands, try this at night: Apply a thin layer of petroleum jelly and wear thin cotton gloves to bed. You can also do this to help dry feet, wearing a pair of cotton socks overnight.
- Avoid scratching, which damages the skin.

Call Kaiser Permanente if . . .

- You itch all over your body without an obvious cause or rash.
- Itching is so bad that you cannot sleep and home treatment methods are not helping.
- The skin is badly broken due to scratching.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.